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CZECHOSLOVAK CONSUMER GOODS, INCLUDING PAPER AND MEDICINES, OF POOR QUALITY

[Comment: The following is the full text of Radio Free Europe Item No 10192/55, dated 28 November 1955, discussing the availability and quality of various kinds of consumer goods in Czechoslovakia. Source of the report is a 42-year-old Czech doctor from the Cheb district hospital, who escaped to the West in August 1955, which is the last date of his observation.]

The RFE evaluation of the report states that the information provided by source is appreciated by them, and adds the following comments: A television-radio combination set costs 2,980 crowns in Czechoslovakia; there are also available on the market television sets produced by "Tesla," national enterprise, size 15 x 20 centimeters; there are 200,000 motorcycles, including partly new types, in Czechoslovakia; "Vulcan" suitcases have been advertised for sale for 29.20 to 63.20 crowns; suitcases made of leather, and which are 3 centimeters in height, cost 666 crowns.]

Radio Sets

The radio sets which can be bought in stores are produced by the "Elektra" Plant, national enterprise. During the past 7 years the makes and prices of radio sets have been changed several times to confuse buyers, so that they would not discover that prices were going up instead of down. Source owned a six-tube "Tesla" radio which he bought in 1947 for about 6,000 crowns. Radios of the same capacity sold today are considerable more expensive. Some radio sets which carried names like "Harmonia," "Blanik," "Orchestra," etc., were sold before the currency reform for about 13,000 to 15,000 crowns. Parts for radio sets, especially tubes, are hard to get. It is also difficult to have a set repaired.

Television Sets

A television set costs over 2,000 crowns. It is a large box, with a small screen 9 by 12 centimeters. The letters "Leningrad" are written on the box in the Russian alphabet. Source had not seen sets of any other make in stores or any other place. Source learned from a friend, who was a television specialist, that these sets were made in the East Zone of Germany and were being sold as if made in the Soviet Union.

Bicycles

Various types of bicycles can be obtained in Czechoslovakia, but not everywhere. There is a much larger selection in Prague than in okres towns. During 1953 and 1954, many serious injuries treated at the Department of Surgery of Cheb Hospital were caused by bicycle accidents because the handle bars were of inferior quality and broke easily while the bicycle was in use.

Motorcycles

Only old types of motorcycles are seen in the streets. In these types the rider has his feet on foot holders rather than on a running board.

Automobiles

There is little choice in automobiles. There are no intermediate models of vehicles between passenger automobiles and large buses. There are no small buses for ten persons as seen in West Germany. Source was present several times when Western automobiles were seen in the Czech streets where they caused a minor sensation. A group of admirers surrounded each such automobile. Such an occasion occurred when the Austrian soccer team was in Prague last year.

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This year source was present when a group of people were comparing new types of Czechoslovak "Spartak" automobiles with small foreign cars from the West. At first glance everybody could see the difference between the well-built West European cars compared to the Czechoslovak "tin can." The easy, quiet starting of the foreign car caused astonishment when compared to the starting of the "Spartak" with its loud grinding gears. The following joke is applicable to the present situation: One man suddenly saw an American automobile standing on Václavské Náměstí. He forgot himself for a moment and shouted in admiration. Suddenly he noticed that another man was closely watching him, and therefore he quickly added: "that is a Soviet ZIS." The other man replied: "Mister, you do not know automobiles." And the first man answered: "Oh, you are wrong, but I do not know you."

Luggage

Suitcases which can be bought in Czechoslovakia are made of paper, occasionally of cloth. There is only one type of leather suitcase. Suitcases made of plastics, such as "Vulkan," are not obtainable. Nor is it possible to buy aluminum suitcases, or seal skin suitcases. There is little choice in size or shape of suitcases, usually they are rectangular. There are no round or square shaped suitcases.

Travel Articles

Cases for toilet articles (necessaire), which can be bought in large quantities in West Germany, are unobtainable in Czechoslovakia.

Ball-Point Pens

The refill of the ball-point pen is not mechanically stable and the ink often disappears from the paper. For that reason a ban on using ball-point pens for writing postal money orders went into effect last year.

Paper

During the past 2 years it was impossible to buy thin, good quality paper on which it would be possible to write in ink on both sides. The "Narpa," national enterprise, stores never carried any. However, Czechoslovak paper is of better quality than Soviet paper. The Soviet medical periodicals in the field of tuberculosis are on such bad paper that X-ray reproductions are smeared and do not serve any educational purpose. This was pointed out even by a well-known physician and scientist, who although a member of the KSC (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), was of democratic leaning. He was showing a friend of source a smeared reproduction in a Soviet magazine on X rays and he laughed when he compared it with magazines on X rays from the free world.

After 1948, source had mentioned the poor quality of the Czechoslovak paper to a relative, who had joined the KSC and become the director of a Czechoslovak paper mill. This relative was very much in favor of the Communist type of production, and was comparing it with capitalist production. He [the relative] used to recall that his father, who was a known expert in the Czechoslovak paper industry, used to travel occasionally to meetings of paper experts in Czechoslovakia. In those days, according to his father, every producer guarded the secret of his production. For example, Spiro, the manufacturer, made paper of exceptional quality, and although other paper industry experts came to him, he guarded the secret of the quality-paper production and would not tell anybody about the process. This, according to the relative of source, changed considerably after 1948. Today each plant shares its results with other plants and by the continuous exchange of information the quality of paper, as all other products, continually improves.

The source visited Engr X [source's relative?] again in 1954 and found out that X had changed his views. He was no longer the director of the paper mill, even though he was an expert in the field of paper production: he had just a minor position at the mill. The Communists had discovered that he was a "class enemy" because of his origin and they kicked him out of the party and removed him from his position.

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As an illustration of what the conferences of so-called specialists are really like, source gives this example. A good friend of source is an engineer, employed in an enterprise of the heavy engineering industry in Brno, where boilers are made. This engineer often made official visits to other plants, to exchange information concerning the production of boilers with other experts. When source questioned him as to the results of such talks, the engineer said that they are called "pohoph", [abbreviation] for "porada h..... platna" (conference not worth a ...). The so called "pohops" are attended by "experts" who know nothing about the field. If they do understand, they recognize that nothing can be accomplished by trying hard so they do not do any more than they have to, thinking that there is no reason why they should help socialism.

Toilet Articles

Razor blades are of inferior quality in Czechoslovakia, even though the quality has improved since 1954. Nevertheless, a majority of the friends of source, including members of the KSC, were shaving with blades which came from the West as gifts, and they re-use these time and time again. Toothpaste is also of inferior quality and is sold only in bakelite tubes. The tubes are often half empty, being blown up by air. Source was present when buyers of such half empty tubes tried in vain to return them. A bakelite tube has no properties for a good toothpaste tube. All the paste cannot be pushed out of it and it cannot be rolled.

Rare drugs are also placed in bakelite tubes and not in normal metal tubes as is done in the West, or in Czechoslovakia before the war. Bakelite is also used for the production of water faucets and these are in all new apartments. Tooth brushes are also of inferior quality, even though they could be made of nylon, as they are made of nylon in the West.

Medicines

Many Czechoslovak drugs manufactured in the past few years are weak and often harmful, and many of the drugs had to be discarded in hospitals, including calcium, opiates, etc.

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